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SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

1. Mideast
2. U.S.-PRC Tension

Key stories in the media:

The Jerusalem Post reported that PM Benjamin Netanyahu and DM Ehud Barak are at odds over whether to form a committee to probe Operation Cast Lead: Barak has spoken out against forming an

independent committee that would probe beyond the in-depth investigation of the IDF. The PM is still undecided. The Jerusalem Post quoted a top officer as saying yesterday that Military Police investigations into allegations of crimes by IDF personnel during Operation Cast Lead have uncovered evidence that could lead to indictments against officers and soldiers. IDF Advocate-General Maj.-Gen. Avichai Mandelblit will make the final decision on whether charges will be brought against the soldiers. The officer would not reveal which allegations were backed up by evidence, but The Jerusalem Post quoted other sources as saying that the possibility that soldiers deliberately killed innocent Palestinians had been ruled out. The remaining investigations will be completed in the coming weeks. HaQaretz and other media quoted the GOI as saying in its official response to the Goldstone Report that two IDF officers were disciplined for using white phosphorus in the shelling of a UNRWA facility during Operation Cast Lead. In response to a report of a 60-meter Star of David carved into a Palestinian field during the operation, The Jerusalem Post quoted the IDF as saying that it was unfamiliar with the incident and that the Foreign Ministry should be contacted for an official comment.

Maariv reported that indirect talks to smooth out differences between the parties are taking place between U.S. Special Envoy George Mitchell, Netanyahu envoy Yitzhak Molcho and Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat. Major media quoted Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as saying yesterday in an interview with the British newspaper The Guardian that Israel's continued activity in the West Bank was leading to a "one-state solution." He was quoted as saying he was prepared to relaunch peace negotiations in exchange for a full three-month settlement freeze. Abbas said he could be inclined

toward accepting the Obama administration's proposal for direct, but low-level, talks prior to beginning full-scale peace negotiations, hinting that progress hinges on the acceptance by Israel of the framework of a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders and an end to occupation. He told The Guardian that he and former PM Ehud Olmert had come closer to a peace agreement than any previous Israeli or Palestinian leadership, complete with discussions about "border swaps, Jerusalem and the return of some refugees." However, Abbas said, PM Netanyahu had refused to continue those negotiations.

Abbas also reiterated that he would not tolerate a return to violent resistance and said he supported Egypt's construction of a border fence with Gaza as part of its efforts to crack down on smuggling. Yesterday Israel Radio reported that Abbas told Arab journalists in London, after he met with British PM Gordon Brown and Foreign Secretary David Miliband that the PA will consult with Arab states and then provide its response within a week's time to the proposal made by Special Envoy Mitchell that he mediate between the Palestinians and Israel in indirect talks.

The media reported that Hamas threatens to strike at Israeli targets abroad to avenge the killing of its senior activist Mahmoud al-Mabhouh during his stay in Dubai on January 20. The media highlighted al-Mabhouh's alleged principal role in arms-smuggling from Iran to Hamas in Gaza. The media reported that yesterday at the cabinet meeting, although they did not acknowledge Israel's responsibility for the assassination, ministers praised their overall satisfaction over the performance of Mossad Director Meir Dagan. Media quoted National Infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau as denying any link to al-Mabhouh's death. Landau had led a delegation to Abu Dhabi to attend an International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) conference.

Yesterday Italian PM Silvio Berlusconi was quoted as saying in an interview with HaQaretz that Israel's settlement policy is a mistake. The Jerusalem Post reported that during the visit of Berlusconi and eight members of his cabinet to Israel, which starts today, Israeli officials will focus on Italian aid to the Iranian satellite program.

Yesterday Maariv quoted National Security Advisor James Jones as saying over the weekend that the growing pressure on Iran is liable to lead it to an attack against Israel. He said that history showed that when regimes feel under pressure, as Iran feels internally and as it will soon feel from without, they often opt to attack.

HaQaretz reported that last week CIA Director Leon Panetta visited Israel and met with senior officials. According to an item posted

on Saturday on the U.S news site Politico, the officials' main subject of conversation was Iran.

HaQaretz cited the London-based daily Al-Hayat, which quoted Assistant Secretary of State Ambassador Jeff Feltman as saying that the U.S. is concerned that Hizbullah's ongoing efforts to rearm could prompt a war between Israel and Lebanon.

Electronic media reported that Shin Bet has arrested two East Jerusalem residents suspected of being recruited by Hamas during their studies in Jordan, and gathering information on potential terror targets in Israel -- at key public sites. The two are suspected to have collected the videos, photographs, charts, and information on a USB flash drive which they were meant to transfer to their handlers. They were then meant to receive explosives. They allegedly prepared a cave near Sataf, in the Judean Hills, and expanded it to use as a hiding place for their weapons. Murad Kamal, 24, from Wadi Joz in Jerusalem, and Murad Nimer, 24 from Tzur Baher, also in the capital, both carry Israeli IDs. They were arrested on January 3 at the central bus station in Beersheva. The two are to be charged in the Jerusalem District Court today with contacting a foreign agent, membership in a terror organization, aiding the enemy during wartime, and espionage. Israel Radio said that Hamas-abroad took command of the foiled operation. Leading media quoted Egyptian security forces as saying over the weekend that Egypt forces arrested 23 Egyptians suspected of belonging to a radical Muslim terror group that was planning to attack Jewish worshipers during a pilgrimage to the grave of Rabbi Yaakov Abuhatzaira, who is buried in the Egyptian city of Damanhur.

Yesterday Israel Radio quoted American sources as saying that the first mission of the new U.S. ambassador in Damascus will be to take speedy action to bring about the renewal of peace talks between Israel and Syria. The U.S. sources told the international newspaper Asharq al-Awsat that it was possible that renewed talks between Israel and Syria would reduce the growing pressure on the Obama administration, after the it was accused of not doing enough, and that since Obama's taking office, no real peace talks have taken place in the Middle East.

The media reported that yesterday the Petah-Tikva Magistrate's Court released all the suspects in the December 11 arson of a mosque in the West Bank. The court cited lack of evidence.

Yesterday Maariv reported that the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee will soon hold a special hearing dedicated Friday's revelation in the newspaper about the link between the New Israel Fund and dozens of Israeli NPOs, which served as virtually exclusive sources for the incriminating evidence presented in the Goldstone Report.

Maariv and Israel Radio reported that former Netanyahu adviser Naftali Bennett -- a resident of Ra'anana inside the Green Line -- was appointed director-general of the Yesha Council of Jewish Settlements in the Territories. In an unrelated item, The Jerusalem Post reported that the IDF has agreed to erect a watchtower on a strategic Gush Etzion hilltop called Shdema, thereby handing a partial victory to settlers who have campaigned for two years to ensure that it remains under Israeli control.

The Jerusalem Post reported that yesterday Breaking the Silence, the NGO which collects mostly anonymous testimony from soldiers serving in the territories, released a booklet containing interviews with 96 female soldiers who reported witnessing or taking part in violence or degrading treatment of Palestinians since the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000.

Yesterday Yediot reported that for the first time, Israel has begun to train German pilots to use military equipment that is to be used in Afghanistan.

Makor Rishon-Hatzofe reported that, for the first time in Israeli history, the Justice Ministry is preparing a bill that would define Israel's attitude to terrorist activities in the country and set updated punitive norms.

The Jerusalem Post quoted National Infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau as saying yesterday that he had recently raised the idea of

cooperating with Jordan on an nuclear power plan in a recent meeting with French Environment Minister Jean-Louis Borloo.

Leading media reported that last night Israeli security staff at a West Bank crossing shot and wounded an Israeli truck driver who they thought was a terrorist.

1. Mideast:

Block Quotes:

1. QMore Talk, Less Action

The Director of the Interdisciplinary Center's Global Research in International Affairs Center, columnist Barry Rubin, wrote in the conservative, independent Jerusalem Post (2/1): QIf Obama were honest -- and effective -- he would admit that Israel did almost everything he asked, while the Palestinian Authority defied him.... The PA has refused to negotiate for five months after Obama asked it to do so. Yet for Obama to pressure the PA to go to the table -- the normal route in such situations -- is unthinkable for him. So he has no way out of his failure. And Israel's Qreward or its major concession? Not even a mention in the President's main annual speech for the first time, I presume, in decades. So what are they going to do? Clinton lays out the framework: QWe are going to continue to do everything we can to create an environment in which that is possible. In other words, have lots of talks and present ideas which continually fail but at least show they are trying. Of course, what's left out is the missing element which might allow at least for some minimal progress: put real pressure on the Palestinian Authority to make some compromises. But that isn't going to happen. And so we return to business as usual.

II. QIt's All Obama's Fault

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote in the independent, left-Ha'aretz (1/31): QAs usual changes [in the Middle Eastern diplomatic landscape] are of no interest to Israel. Obama, like every other U.S. president, continues to be our impresario. Only ours. As such, the real negotiations are with him and not with the Palestinians or the Arab states. When Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to limit construction in the territories he was responding not to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, but to Obama.

When Netanyahu speaks of resuming negotiations he is addressing not the Palestinian government, but rather Obama. Abbas and Obama, of course, are the ones responsible for the lack of a peace process: Abbas painted himself into a corner, while Obama aimed for the skies with his vision and now cannot deliver the goods. It's his fault, and Israel can celebrate its victory. It may be that Obama is only

an orator and not a statesman. But Israel is the last one who can judge him for that. Israel is very pleased with the cage in which it has trapped him. The question is what Israel will be left with after this success. Indeed, the threat of peace was nearer a year ago. We nearly fell into the trap when Netanyahu announced the freeze in settlement construction. We were on the verge of another Masada. But thank God we pulled ourselves together. Certainly we will survive this American president, too.

III. QAt Last, a Real Response

Military correspondent Amos Harel wrote on page one of Ha'aretz (2/1): QIsrael's detailed response to the Goldstone Report shows that the country can, in fact, respond to accusations with more than complaints of anti-Semitism and endless repetitions of the mantra that the QIsrael Defense Forces is the most moral army in the world. Drawn up by the Foreign Ministry, the Justice Ministry, and the IDF Prosecutor's office, the document gives a wide-ranging and well-argued reply to many of the claims raised by Goldstone. It also contains some interesting details that were never, for some reason, disclosed to the Israeli media and public about Operation Cast Lead. The most remarkable details concern the one time

disciplinary measures were taken against senior commanders in the operation [who unjustifiably ordered artillery fire on a United Nations compound].... Israel's detailed and well-argued report shows that the country has a reasonably good case against the Goldstone accusations. This naturally begs the question why Israeli leadership is so wary of a state commission of inquiry that could ostensibly clear up matters once and for all. Any such obligation is missing from the report, as arguments in Israel continue on whether to set up an examination committee or a state commission of inquiry; as of now, it seems an examination committee will be set up, but its powers are yet to be defined. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu preferred to postpone the decision -- hoping that either a consensus will be reached, or that the international pressure on Israel will ease, making it the committee unnecessary.

IV. QThe Bomb or Disintegration

Veteran journalist and television anchor Yaron London wrote in the mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (2/1): QIf an Iranian bomb should be dropped on us, a colossal disaster will occur immediately, but the chances that such an event will take place are fairly low. If we do not disengage from the Palestinians, no immediate disaster will take place, but we will gradually

deteriorate and IsraelQs end will ultimately arrive. In physiological terms, this can be illustrated as the blow of an ax that slices off the head with a single blow, but is likely to miss our neck, as opposed to bloodletting that is already draining us of blood, and will undoubtedly put us to death as a nation, even if not as individuals. From this analysis you can understand that I do not believe in the possibility of establishing a binational state, whose Jewish citizens will be able to live in it peacefully and influence its character. Such a state will not be modeled after the Alexandria of the early 20th century. It will not be a calm multicultural Levantine metropolis, it will be Beirut of the 1980s.... Explicit things are being said to us about events of immeasurable severity. The leaders, in their cautious and rare statements, describe upheavals of far-reaching significance that will take place tomorrow, and may already be taking place now, but the public discourse on these matters is incredibly meager -- a nation in stupor.

1V. QHeed a Friends Words

The independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized (2/1): QThe [visiting] Prime Minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, has stood out among European leaders in his special friendship toward Israel.... Berlusconi ... has demands of the Arab side. He backs internal Palestinian unity and the promotion of regional economic projects and he displayed understanding for Israel's apprehensions of continued violence after it withdraws from territory, as happened in Gaza. But the main message borne by the guest from Rome concerns leadership. He believes that the attainment of peace requires leaders to display courage. It is worth Netanyahu's while to heed the advice of his Italian friend. Instead of wasting time with redundant propaganda wars with the Palestinian Authority, and currying favor with the right by planting unneeded trees in settlements, Netanyahu must tirelessly push for peace with Syria, and explain to the public that the freeze on construction in the settlements is only the first step in the undoing of this harmful enterprise and the establishment of a Palestinian state in the territories. Even his best friend in Europe thinks so.

VI. QFarther Right than the Government

Hadas Ziv, Director-General of Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, wrote in the popular, pluralist Maariv (2/1): QThe implication of the arguments presented by the non-profit organization Im Tirtzu [which claims that the New Israel Fund abets IsraelQs enemies], with

the support of Ben Caspit, diplomatic correspondent of Maariv daily] is that it would be better to dodge, lie and cheat only in order to defend the actions of the army, even if they were immoral. The Israeli Government would have done well had it gathered soldiers, officers and statesmen to present the Gaza Goldstone committee with the aggregate of evidence. It is reasonable to assume that the armyQs testimony would have enhanced GoldstoneQs ability to reach the truth.... Caspit wrote an article that was relevant three months

ago. Today Israeli society, officials in the Justice Ministry and the Foreign Ministry, Knesset members, and cabinet ministers all understand that the refusal to testify before Goldstone was a mistake. Many of them believe that had Israel provided all of the information it had and created an atmosphere of cooperation, the committee would have been more capable of investigating the truth. The norm is to say that the media is biased in favor of the left wing. Many studies have demonstrated that not only is that not the case, but that in times of conflict or a fight with external forces, the media tends to toe the government line. Caspit's article shows that sometimes the media even goes further to the right than the government.

12. U.S.-PRC Tension:

Block Quotes:

1I. QChina Endangered?

The Director of the Interdisciplinary Center's Global Research in International Affairs Center, columnist Barry Rubin, wrote in the conservative, independent Jerusalem Post (2/1): QFor a superpower-in-waiting, China is conducting itself with unbecomingly irresponsible, not just on Iran but also on human rights, climate change and Internet freedom. (Google may be forced to reduce its presence in China due to government-orchestrated cyber-attacks.)

Nor does Beijing show concern that many of the weapons making their way into Hamas-controlled Gaza are of Chinese manufacture.... Diplomatically, as a permanent Security Council member, China can invariably be counted on to vote the interests of the Arab and Muslim bloc. Plainly, the Israel-China relationship is strategically important, but Beijing's insensitivity to core Israeli concerns does not fail to disappoint. Is it not absurd that China feels threatened because the U.S. is selling Taiwan weapons that pose no threat to mainland security, while it shamelessly blocks international pressure aimed at keeping the atomic bomb away from Muslim fanatics?

II. QA Smell of Confrontation in the Air

Columnist Shmuel Rosner, who was HaQaretz's correspondent in Washington, wrote in the popular, pluralist Maariv (2/1): QLast weekend signaled a sudden deterioration in U.S.-China relations.... The patience of the U.S. is growing thin [also regarding Iran and terror]. This political spirit fits a determined move by the Obama administration, which wishes to prove to its voters that it is not QweakQ after the blow it sustained in the Massachusetts [senatorial] elections.

CUNNINGHAM